
First records of Wahlberg's Honeybird *Prodotiscus regulus* for Mali and its status in Western Africa

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Premières données de l'Indicateur de Wahlberg *Prodotiscus regulus* pour le Mali et son statut en Afrique occidentale. En janvier 2010 trois Indicateurs de Wahlberg *Prodotiscus regulus* ont été observés dans une petite vallée à 30 km au sud-ouest de Bamako, Mali. Ces observations représentent les premières mentions de l'espèce pour le pays. La zone principale de répartition de l'Indicateur de Wahlberg se trouve dans l'est et le sud du continent, mais il n'y a que peu d'observations en Afrique de l'Ouest ; le statut de l'espèce dans cette région est analysé.

Summary. In January 2010 three Wahlberg's Honeybirds *Prodotiscus regulus* were observed in a small valley 30 km south-west of Bamako, Mali. These constitute the first records of the species for the country. Wahlberg's Honeybird occurs widely in eastern and southern Africa, but there are only a few records in western Africa. Its status in West Africa is discussed.

In January and February 2010, I spent a total of 42 hours birding over four days in a small valley c.30 km south-west of Bamako, Mali. During my first visit, on 6 January, I observed a small, dull-coloured bird with a conspicuous, strongly undulating, flight recalling a small woodpecker. When perched it had an upright posture recalling a flycatcher. Adding to the confusion, the bird had a fine, pointed bill with a convex culmen, recalling that of, e.g., Western Violet-backed Sunbird *Anthreptes longuemarei*, which was also present in the valley. During my third visit, on 29 January, I observed two individuals of the same species. All three birds were photographed and identified as Wahlberg's Honeybirds *Prodotiscus regulus*. These observations constitute the first record for Mali and only the fifth record west of Nigeria.

The bird on 6 January (bird A) was observed for c.2 minutes from a minimum distance of c.10 m, around 10.15 hrs, at 12°27'38"N 08°11'54"W. The first bird on 29 January (bird B) was seen around 08.30 hrs for one minute, at 12°27'15"N 08°11'34"W, whilst the second (bird C), was observed around 09.50 hrs for c.2–3 minutes from a distance of 5–10 m, at the same location as bird A, c.1 km from bird B. The species was not recorded during my second and fourth visits to the area on 17 January and 7 February. Observations were made using 10×42 binoculars. The following description is based on field notes and photographs.

Description

Size, shape and general impression. Small and passerine-like. Bird A was seen next to Chestnut-crowned Sparrow Weavers *Plocepasser superciliosus* and appeared to be smaller. Upright posture when perched, and fine, pointed bill gave a flycatcher-like impression.

Plumage. Head dark grey or grey-brown. Upperparts more or less uniformly dark grey to grey-brown. Median and greater coverts and secondaries with pale fringes. Throat pale, contrasting with the darker head, in birds B and C, but only slightly paler and inconspicuous in bird A. Upper breast greyish (A) or pale brownish-grey (B and C), becoming paler towards the belly. Undertail-coverts white. Tail rather long; the distinctive pattern with all-white outer three rectrices and blackish central rectrices was only seen well in bird C (tail pattern inadequately seen in flight in B and not at all in A).

Bare parts. Bill fine and pointed with a broad base and a convex culmen; black. Birds B and C had slightly swollen, pale-coloured gapes. Legs black.

Ageing. The difference in head coloration between bird A and birds B and C is probably related to age, as juveniles have paler upperparts than adults (Borrow & Demey 2001, Short & Horne 2001). Only B and C can be aged reliably as juveniles, due to the swollen gapes and the all-white outer rectrices (seen well in C).

Table 1. Published records of Wahlberg's Honeybird *Prodotiscus regulus* from western Africa (ordered from west to east). Coordinates shown only if mentioned in the respective publication.

Tableau 1. Données publiées de l'Indicateur de Wahlberg *Prodotiscus regulus* pour l'Afrique de l'Ouest (d'ouest en est). Les coordonnées sont incluses uniquement si elles sont mentionnées dans la publication en question.

Country / Pays	Locality / Localité	Coordinates / Coordonnées	Date	Number / Nombre	Reference / Référence
Gambia	Kulari Swamp, URD	13°23'N 14°06'W	30.9.2006	1	Roy (2009)
Mali	30 km SW Bamako	12°27'22"N 8°12'W	6.1.2010	1	This paper
	30 km SW Bamako	12°27'22"N 8°12'W	29.1.2010	2 immatures	This paper
Liberia ¹	Mount Nimba		Jan. 1968	1 immature	Colston & Curry-Lindahl (1986)
Côte d'Ivoire	23 km S Ferkessédougou		1.5.1989	1	Demey & Fishpool (1991)
Togo	Kolokopé	07°48'N 01°18'E	30.8.1969	1 adult	de Roo <i>et al.</i> (1971)
Nigeria ²	Enugu	06°20'N 07°29'E	27.6.1954	1 male	Serle (1957)
	Enugu	06°20'N 07°29'E	27.9.1954	1 female	Serle (1957)
Cameroon ³	Ndu, Banso highlands	06°15'N 10°45'E	22.5.1947 ⁴	1 male	Serle (1950)
	60 miles N Ngaoundéré			1	Louette (1981)
	Sir	10°33'N 13°41'E	Dec 1970	1	Louette (1981)
Central African Republic	Bozoum ⁵		16.5.1914	1	Reichenow (1921)

¹Gatter (1997) also reports a possible Wahlberg's Honeybird from the Cavalla River east of Zwedru, Liberia, on 12 December 1983.

²Serle (1957) states 'Single birds observed on four occasions at Enugu (...)', but gives details for only two observations. A fifth but unconfirmed record from Nigeria concerned a juvenile seen on two consecutive days on the Mabilla Plateau in December 2003 (T. Disley in *Bull. ABC* 11: 177).

³Seven records were known from Cameroon by 2005 (R. Demey in *litt.* 2011, based on M. Languy's (2005) unpublished *Birds of Cameroon: Their Status and Distribution*). Only the first three have apparently been published. Cf. map in Borrow & Demey (2008).

⁴Serle (1950) gives no indication in which year of his tour (i.e. from 1947 to 1948) the bird was collected.

⁵Reichenow (1921) and others spell it 'Bosum'.

Behaviour. Bird B was seen close to a mixed-species feeding flock including Senegal Eremomela *Eremomela pusilla*, Grey-backed Camaroptera *Camaroptera brachyura*, Tawny-flanked Prinia *Prinia subflava*, Yellow White-eye *Zosterops senegalensis*, >15 Scarlet-chested Sunbirds *Chalcomitra senegalensis* and other species, and was perhaps associated with it, although the honeybird left the area shortly after discovery, apparently not with the flock.

Exclusion of similar species. Cassin's Honeybird *Prodotiscus insignis* has olive-green upperparts with contrasting dark-centred tertials and a prominent white eye-ring. Superficially similar species such as Lead-coloured Flycatcher *Myioparus plumbeus* can be excluded based on the combination of coloration, bill shape and tail pattern (cf. Borrow & Demey 2001).

Habitat

The valley runs from a slightly elevated pass in the north-west c.4 km towards Route Nationale 5 in the south-east, where it eventually widens. It is dominated by more or less dense shrub-

and woodland, interspersed by more open areas with sandy and rocky soils, and bordered by rocky slopes. A narrow band of dense woodland dominated by rather high broadleaf trees bordered a stream that had already dried out prior to my first visit.

Status of Wahlberg's Honeybird in western Africa

Wahlberg's Honeybird inhabits a variety of wooded habitats and bushland, and occurs over much of eastern and southern Africa (Fry *et al.* 1988, Short & Horne 2002). It is considered sedentary (Short & Horne 2001). Published records from western Africa are scarce, but occur over a remarkably wide range (Table 1). Several observations indicate breeding in this region: a female collected at Enugu, Nigeria, had eggs (Serle 1957), juveniles / immatures were observed on Mount Nimba, Liberia (Colston & Curry-Lindahl 1986), in Mali (this paper) and Nigeria (T. Disley in *Bull. ABC* 11: 177). Overall, however, the species' status in western Africa, especially west of Cameroon, is largely unknown.



Figure 1. Wahlberg's Honeybird *Prodotiscus regulus*, Bird A, c.30 km south-west of Bamako, Mali, 6 January 2010 (Marco Thoma)

Indicateur de Wahlberg *Prodotiscus regulus*, Oiseau A, environ 30 km au sud-ouest de Bamako, Mali, 6 janvier 2010 (Marco Thoma)

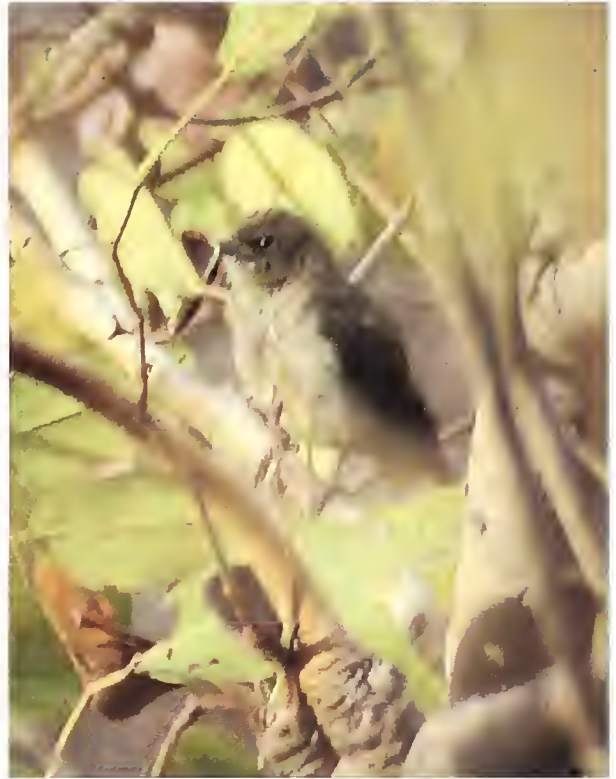


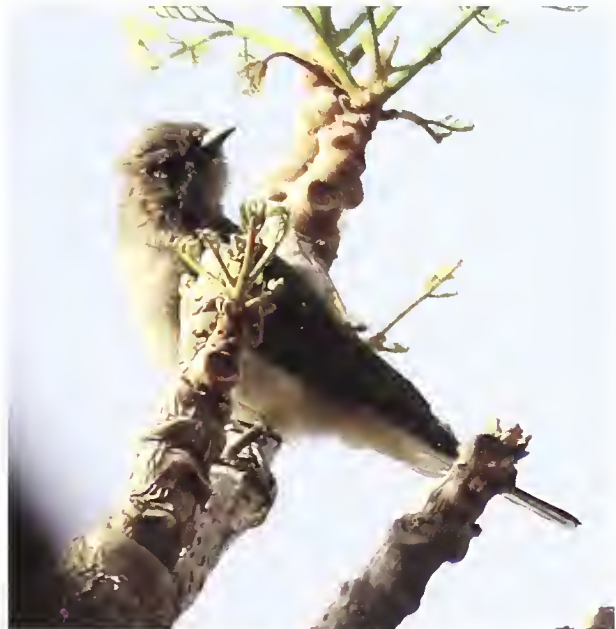
Figure 2. Wahlberg's Honeybird *Prodotiscus regulus*, Bird B, c.30 km south-west of Bamako, Mali, 29 January 2010 (Marco Thoma)

Indicateur de Wahlberg *Prodotiscus regulus*, Oiseau B, environ 30 km au sud-ouest de Bamako, Mali, 29 janvier 2010 (Marco Thoma)



Figures 3–4. Wahlberg's Honeybird *Prodotiscus regulus*, Bird C, c.30 km south-west of Bamako, Mali, 29 January 2010 (Marco Thoma)

Indicateur de Wahlberg *Prodotiscus regulus*, Oiseau C, environ 30 km au sud-ouest de Bamako, Mali, 29 janvier 2010 (Marco Thoma)



Discussion

Wahlberg's Honeybird might appear to be a vagrant to western Africa rather than a regular visitor. The few records west of Cameroon do not permit assumptions to be made regarding possible seasonal patterns. It is notable, however, that records are available from both the wet and dry seasons, suggesting year-round presence. My observation of three individuals, including two juveniles, over 23 days, combined with the presence of suitable habitat and host species such as Grey-backed Camaroptera and Scarlet-chested Sunbird in Mali, as well as the widely spread records in western Africa (all in suitable breeding habitat) and high proportion of potential breeding records suggest that the species breeds in the region including in Mali. Reasons for the paucity of records include: (1) the small size and dull colour of Wahlberg's Honeybird, together with its behaviour and habitat choice, (2) small population size and / or very low density, (3) highly fragmented range, and (4) the small number of observers in the region and / or familiar with the species. Proof is needed that West African records of Wahlberg's Honeybird represent residents and not migrants, as Nigeria, Cameroon and Central African Republic may hold a breeding population of unknown size, and possibly are the source of all other West African records.

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